
dear all, thank you all for the inspiring reflections + sparring below.

i send a fast thread into the weave as well:

there are of course numerous overlaps between the german and the danish- and here (dk) one uses 'sakral' for 'sacred' as well. ['sakrale rum', 'sakrale sted', osv / sacred space, sacred place, etc.]

'hellig' ('holy') in danish tends more often to be used when interwoven to religion specifically (for ex. the 'hellig arkitektur' of a specific church, temple, ...).

on a related note, i will look forward to confer the hawels text suggested below by karsten harries; to see how this intersect with the 3 similar terms in danish. (thank you for that source).

'sakral' (dk) is of course sometimes used interchangeable with 'helig' – though like the german terms they are not one and same. 'sakral' is foremost tied to ritual; which in turn need not be tied to any specificity of (a) religion.

to maybe make this slight distinction a bit more clear (in nordic contexts at least), i think foremost now to the examples of sacred architecture created by the swedish architect sigurd lewerentz.

lewerentz's illumination and mediation of the rituals of everyday life become the primary ground(s) for the articulation of the 'sacred'. of course, one can perhaps counter that in so many cases lewerentz had the task/commission to design denominational churches + chapels... but at the very same time we see –experience– the same richness of 'sacred architecture' even in the most so-called 'mundane' examples of his opus. in short, lewerentz praxis and works embody – for me– what is one of many keys to the 'sakral': in his work, *it is the very mud of everyday life that illuminates everyday life.*

best,
courtney (coyne jensen)

Date: Sun, 25 Mar 2012 16:25:46 -0400
From: karsten.harries@YALE.EDU
Subject: Re: Spirituality in Architecture (a thoughtful article)
To: AM-CARC-ACS-L@LISTSERV.TAMU.EDU

Sakral would seem to do quite nicely as a German translation of "sacred". For an excellent discussion of the meaning of "sakral" and its relation to "religiös" and "heilig" I recommend Peter Hawels unusually helpful "Aspekte zur Sakralkunst", in [Sakralität und Moderne](#) (Dorfen: Hawel-Verlag, 2010, pp. 14-74).

All the best,
Karsten Harries

On 3/25/12 9:25 AM, AT Mann wrote:

I found Prem's reaction to Michael's piece very relevant and just have a few comments. It is interesting that when people use the term "sacred," they mean something "higher." It is a word that has many layers of meaning. It is often problematic because of its natural and seemingly exclusive association with religion, whereas in my view, it operates on many other levels beyond the religion/atheism axis as well. Indeed, when my books were translated into German and Danish years ago, I discovered that those languages have no word for "sacred," and use "hellig," meaning "holy" instead, which *does* have an exclusive relationship to god and religion.

A good definition for me that seems to resolve this is that "the sacred is an ethereal quality that has its life in the soul or spirit rather than in any formal religious practice or system. Sacred qualities are dynamic aspects of the human psyche that are independent of form, but that find expression through the world of form." I wonder whether "awe" is really something to be considered in this context, even if it is a word that

comes to the minds of contemporary architects. In my experience, sacred places evoke something in people independent of their religious or atheistic beliefs, indeed they seem to transcend belief. They don't even have to be dramatic (hence qualifying as "awe"), as they might be a rural stream, a beautiful tree, or a natural place of contemplation. Mind you, some sacred places are dramatic, like Delphi or Mt Kailash or the Ganges, however it is much more subtle than that. And the idea that a sacred place has to be a place of congregation, rather than sacred in itself, is as Prem and Michael point out, a denial of the mystery. Long live the mystery!

Best, and everyone enjoy Chichen Itza,

AT

AT Mann

Home: +1 518 822 0882 Cell: +1 917 596 2108 Skype: atmann4 Twitter: @atmann

Website: <http://atmann.net>

["Sacred Landscapes"](#) is available and "The Sacred Language of Trees" will be published in 2012

Thanks Julio for circulating Michael's fascinating and provocative piece. It made me think and I found myself relating to both sides of this debate.

On the one hand I see De Botton's phrase "temple for atheists" as an oxymoron. A temple is an acknowledgment of a higher realm, whereas atheism is a denial of such a realm. As the philosopher Charles Taylor has pointed out, when we do not have a higher "horizon of significance", there is no basis for differentiating between choices; a choice involving petty self-gratification exists at the same level as a choice that has to be based on ethical normative values. In a world for atheists if we seek an architecture that produces awe we immediately run into questions such as: "Awe of what?" or "Who decides what should provoke that awe?". The true temple occurs when the believers who enter it acknowledge a higher presence, are humble before that presence, and the temple is shaped primarily by an attempt to articulate that presence. Without the mediation of this higher presence, I fear that a proposal to build temples for atheists will find that there is no dividing line between an architecture of awe and an architecture of earthly power. The history of architecture the world over is full of examples of the failure to construct this dividing line. So I find De Botton's proposal not only nonsensical but also dangerous.

But I am also uncomfortable with Anne Rieselbach's proposition that "a space cannot be sacred in itself, that it is only through its setting as a place for gathering for worship, contemplation, prayer, meditation or fellowship that architecture can become sacred. It is the very instrumental nature of architecture, its functional aspect, that helps to call forth the sacred". So I also wonder about Michael's words that immediately follow: "an attempt to disengage the act of belief, of coming together as a community of believers, from the space in which that gathering happens - why it happens - keeps architecture and art at a safe distance from the immeasurable, the ineffable, and the mysterious".

The reason for my discomfort is that I have encountered too many people from all faiths who are believers, who are firm in their faith, yet who follow their faith largely out of self-absorption or habit. Conditioned by their cultural tradition to believe, they are unable to see beyond the traditional rituals of their religious practice. And they participate in those rituals either because they cannot see beyond their conditioned habits or in order to placate a God they fear, believing that this placation will win them favors from God.

Is this truly connecting with the sacred? I fear not.

If the goal is to win favors from God the self-absorbed focus of the endeavor results in this self-absorption dominating life upon stepping out of the place of worship. A true connection with the sacred would invoke a sense of humility in the presence of the sacred. It would invoke a sense of bliss on becoming aware of the compassion and beauty in the sacred. And these attitudes of humility, compassion and beauty would pervade life whether one is inside or outside a place of worship.

And if one worships out of conditioned habit, one fails to achieve any engagement with a wider realm. I recently read about an experiment that demonstrated that when we do something out of habit the level of activity in our brain decreases to the point where we are not aware of our environment. All of us are aware of this when we drive a car along a familiar route with our minds elsewhere, and once we have reached our destination would be hard pressed to recall the specificities of what we saw along the way. We have been evolutionally conditioned to veer towards habit because this lowers the activity in our brain so that we preserve energy for the critical moments when danger presents itself. But the safe environments we have created for ourselves today means that we no longer have the everyday moments of danger that provoke our alertness. So it is easy for us to remain trapped forever in habit, and the fact that the sacred is everywhere and ever present can over time actually anesthetize us to its presence. The challenge we face is to construct and sustain the spiritual alertness that empowers us to always be aware of the sacred.

So I am wary of drawing too direct a connection between the sacredness of space and the acts of worship (and when I say worship here I include all the other acts that Rieselbach refers to such as contemplation, prayer, meditation and fellowship). To rely on this connection is problematic as it [a] fails to see the dangers of self-absorption or habit; [b] fails to recognize the need for constant spiritual alertness; and [c] instead of acknowledging the pervasiveness of the sacred, divides the world into sacred and secular realms where the sacred exists only in those spaces where acts of worship occur. The challenge is far greater and wider than this.

But to follow this thread further is to get into another discussion. Let me return to the presence that Michael saw in the room that evening in New York: "the palpable discomfort of many architects, artists, and academicians in using the 'S' word". I think Michael puts his finger on the root of the problem earlier in the text when he says "it seemed that most of the panelists were uncomfortable with the very word 'sacred', freighted as it is with the requirement of belief - something quite outside the control of the architect". It is exactly this fear of losing control that is the problem, but to understand it fully let us disconnect it for a moment from "the requirement of belief", as this is what may take us toward drawing the connection between acts of belief and sacredness of space.

The problem is that our education in general, plus our professional training as architects, has schooled us into believing that we can never be free unless we are in control of our situation. We are told we are modern, and to be modern is to have broken free of the shackles of feudalism and dogma in order to become a master of your own destiny. Our education is premised on the notion of intellectual rigor which makes us believe that in order to effectively engage with a situation it is necessary to conceptually understand it. To understand a situation is to be on top of it - to be in control. Given this equation drawn between freedom and being in control, architects are fearful in confronting any reality that exists at a level higher than their earthly existence, for to do so is to acknowledge something that is beyond their control and conceptual understanding. One can come to terms with a reality that is greater than you only by surrendering to it, and any form of surrender is seen as a loss of freedom. So they would rather not acknowledge it, or if it is pushed at them they seek to construct arguments that deny its existence so that they can protect their freedom.

Leave alone the sacred, I find that most architects are uncomfortable in talking about 'beauty' if one posits beauty as a higher realm of existence whose principles must be discovered. Try starting a discussion on this with a contemporary architect, and you are likely to be perceived as an archaic individual with fundamentalist beliefs, anachronistically trapped within medieval lines of thought. Yet it is difficult for them to totally deny beauty, for to deny architecture's predication on aesthetic sensibilities is to deny architecture itself. Therefore beauty, if admitted at all, is admitted as the tacit possession of the individual genius, and where it exists it is seen as a product of the creative personality. By treating it as a personality-centric product, it is admitted as an individual's possession, and therefore does not threaten the sense of freedom and control we are schooled to believe in. Look at any significant professional journal that covers architectural practice and you will see that the creative cutting edge of the discipline is largely constructed in terms of individual personalities rather than in terms of any higher principles. One would be hard pressed to articulate a model of architectural practice that is not personality-centric. I am troubled by the ease with which the profession has accepted this state of affairs.

To resolve this impasse it is necessary to rigorously engage with the question of whether surrender to a

higher realm of existence entails a loss of freedom. For this I turn to Soetsu Yanagi's wonderful book: *The Unknown Craftsman - A Japanese Insight Into Beauty* (and if anyone has not read this book I urge you to do so as soon as possible). Yanagi talks about the Japanese tea ceremony, which is often criticized as a ritualistic art of formalities. There are distortions of the tea ceremony which have descended to this level; but to critique all tea ceremonies this way is to misunderstand the true intent of the ceremony. The austerity of the ceremony is a way of focusing the mind by removing clutter, and the ceremony invokes all the senses in order to create a full-bodied awareness. This awareness is intended to make one aware of the sacred universe. This is not in order to conceptually understand the universe, for such an understanding would be beyond the human mind. At the most you can be aware of the order of the universe and change yourself in order to be in harmony with this order. So it is harmony rather than conceptual understanding that one seeks, and once you can bring yourself in harmony with the laws of the universe, the life and vigor present in the universe flows through you and new possibilities arise. Yanagi writes:

"Buddhism teaches that there are two ways of becoming a Buddha: one is called the "Way of Self-Power" (self reliance; *jiriki-do*); the other, the "Way of Other Power" (reliance on an external power or grace; *tariki-do*). The latter may be compared to going to sea in a sailboat; the former, to walking on land. On land one often has to traverse rugged paths, cross muddy pools, and overcome similar obstacles, time and again getting lost growing tired, and undergoing many other trials. For that reason, it is also called the "Way of Hardship" (*nangyo-do*), and it is the way of artists and others who believe themselves to be possessed of greatness, who want to find it out and make use of it. To do this, they are willing to rely on their own individual strength; but only those of extraordinary caliber, or genius, can complete this arduous trip.

Obviously, not all living people can be geniuses; the number of geniuses appearing in any given generation is extremely small. Thus, there are a great many people of ordinary ability living in this world, with a few geniuses among them. Are the masses doomed to simple obliteration? Is there no salvation for them? Buddhism states very explicitly that the mass of the people may also become Buddhas. The sects that emphasize that those not endowed with genius are equally to be granted the bliss of reaching their destination are called *tariki-shu* (sects of reliance on an external power), and their way is called the "Easy Way" (*Igyo-do*), since everyone is to arrive safely and unflinchingly. A ship entering harbour with swelling sails is not doing so on its own but has surrendered to the great power of the wind. In a similar way, the mass of the people, even those devoid of talents, may be carried to their goal with the help of a great external power: they complete their journey with ease. Those who take the hard way seek their own greatness; those who follow the easy way surrender themselves, reflecting on their own smallness."

So there is no loss of freedom in this surrender. Rather, there is a gain in freedom because you reach a potential you would not have reached otherwise. And you use an energy that is a part of the natural order of the universe, without having to impose any energies that do not harmonize with the world. But most of us do not see this, and we persist in taking the hard way of self-power, believing it can be achieved with our own greatness, without realizing how few of us actually have this greatness within us. As Yanagi puts it powerfully "Liberty must not be confused with willfulness. Perfect freedom lies only in observing the law. Willfulness is the heaviest of fetters; self-assertion binds us hand and foot".

Architects will be comfortable in confronting the sacred only once they have been convinced that what they have construed as freedom all these years is actually a constraint.

Regards,
Prem

Prem Chandavarkar
CnT Architects
7 Palace Cross Road, Bangalore - 560020, India
Tel: +91(80) 2334.2101 / 2334.1002 / 2334.6005
Fax: +91(80) 2344.2044
Email: prem@cnt.co.in
Web: <http://www.cnt.co.in>

On 23-Mar-2012, at 9:20 PM, Julio Bermudez wrote:

ACS members

Here is a short and thoughtful piece by our ACS member (and F&F editor in chief) Michael Crosbie on the "S" word in architecture today. It is a reflective note commenting on a panel discussion on "Space, the Sacred, and the Imagination" that took place in New York city last month — an excellent (albeit at times frustrating — see Crosbie's article) event that I attended.

<http://www.faithandform.com/editorial/archive/45-1.php>

Thank you

Julio

Julio Bermudez, Ph.D.
Associate Professor

The Catholic University of America
School of Architecture and Planning
Crough Center of Architectural Studies
620 Michigan Ave NE
Washington, DC 20064

(202) 319-5755 (phone)
bermudez@cua.edu (email)
<http://faculty.cua.edu/bermudez> (web)

"leap and the net will appear"